

**Testimony by Jim Epstein to Montgomery County Council regarding CIP amendment for
Wheaton Community Arts and Culture Center
February 9, 2023**

Good evening, I am Jim Epstein and as some of you know, I am currently the Chair of the Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC) and the President of the Glenmont Forest Neighbors Civic Association (GFNCA). I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony in support for the upcoming CIP amendment regarding the pending Wheaton Community Arts and Culture Center project.

I believe today's amendment regards minimal additional funding to support and finalize the site selection process. As you are aware there will be another opportunity for a further amendment to support the design and construction of this facility and we look forward to this project becoming a shining star in enhancing the existing Wheaton Arts and Entertainment District and providing a cutting edge and unique asset for the community as a whole.

This project provides several positives and incorporates the Council's mandate to increase affordable housing, creates economic and workforce development improvements and promotes the unique diversity that Wheaton showcases.

To take a step back and provide a 50,000 foot overview of this project....

Several years ago, the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County began a series of grants dedicated to stimulate and showcase the diversity of arts in the local Wheaton community. The success of these grants, along with the Wheaton Arts Parade and Festival and other popup events, continue to prove the business case that there is significant and overwhelming desire to support the arts in Wheaton. It also showcases the diversity of the traditional arts represented by a wide variety of local artists. Yet the fact remains that **no real permanent performance or visual arts spaces exist in the Wheaton vicinity.**

Based on these successes and the community demand, DGS created a work group and engaged with an arts consultant to determine the need and demand for such a facility in this area. A POR was subsequently developed and potential site evaluations began. The County Executive and several of you current members on the Council have continued to advocate for this facility and now is the opportunity to move forward and turn this dream into reality.

According to the packet you have received on these amendments, "when evaluating this project, the Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice noted the project has a strong likelihood of advancing racial equity in the arts and culture sector, while also providing equitable access to a public good that is enjoyed in other parts of the County."

So now there is an opportunity to combine multiple goals, engage with the community and finalize design of a world class facility. DGS has agreed to provide a briefing to WUDAC at our meeting next Tuesday evening, showing our love for Wheaton on Valentine's Day. Additionally, DGS and MHP (the potential partner) are planning a public meeting in early March to present its findings and plans, engaging the community to better determine its needs and creating a facility that conforms to the new utilization realities post pandemic.

When combined with affordable housing, this project provides an opportunity to provide multiple benefits to Montgomery County residents. This space should also significantly showcase the multiple cultures that live and work in the area and how the many forms of art unite their cultures and share experiences. A targeted arts and culture facility should showcase both the arts and the cultures that are represented in our communities and Wheaton is the proper location for such a facility.

Thanks again for the opportunity to provide some testimony regarding the need for this facility and to support the progress towards creating this incredible community asset. We look forward to your support for this immediate amendment to fund the remaining site selection and community engagement process and future support for the funding of design and construction.

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Recommended FY24 Capital Budget and Amendments to the FY23-28 Capital Improvements Program (CIP)  
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Wheaton Arts & Cultural Center I am also particularly pleased that we have been able to secure a partner to make our dreams of a Wheaton arts facility a reality. The County has selected Montgomery Housing Partnership's (MHP) proposal to combine an affordable housing development with a new, County-funded arts center in the Wheaton Arts and Entertainment District. MHP has an agreement with Montgomery County Parks to swap a former WMATA-owned land parcel on Georgia Avenue with MHP's Amherst Square Apartments on the east side of Elkin Street. MHP will develop the former WMATA site with two affordable rental buildings with 280 units, a standalone garage, and 40 affordable, for sale units. The arts center will be included on the ground floor of the first rental building fronting on Georgia Avenue. The center will include two performance spaces, classrooms, gallery space, back of house support space, and administrative offices. In addition, once MHP develops the former WMATA site, Parks will redevelop the Amherst Square Apartments site with a new community park. This project must proceed at this time so that MHP can apply this year for low-income housing tax credits from the State to maximize housing affordability. Without committing to the project this year, we risk losing this opportunity to co-locate affordable housing with an attractive community amenity. In order to minimize the financial impact to the CIP, I have assumed that buildout of the interior space will be funded in FY29; however, I am pursuing State funding for the project to expedite the interior build out. When evaluating this project, the Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice noted the community engagement process involved in determining the need for an arts and culture space in Wheaton. They also indicated that the project has a strong likelihood of advancing racial equity in the arts and culture sector, while also providing equitable access to a public good that is enjoyed in other parts of the County.

The consultants, suggested this facility could function as an arts incubator and identified the following benefits of such a facility:

- Increased arts and cultural activities in Wheaton.
- Professional development opportunities for local artists and arts organizations.
- New opportunities for Wheaton's diverse ethnic community to share their cultural offerings with the public.
- New spaces for children and families to participate in the arts.
- New spaces for youth to participate in the arts after school.

- Support for the growing visual arts community. Ability to provide affordable performance and rehearsal space in Wheaton to arts groups from the region.  
Ability to provide professional support and guidance by an experienced arts administrator.
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